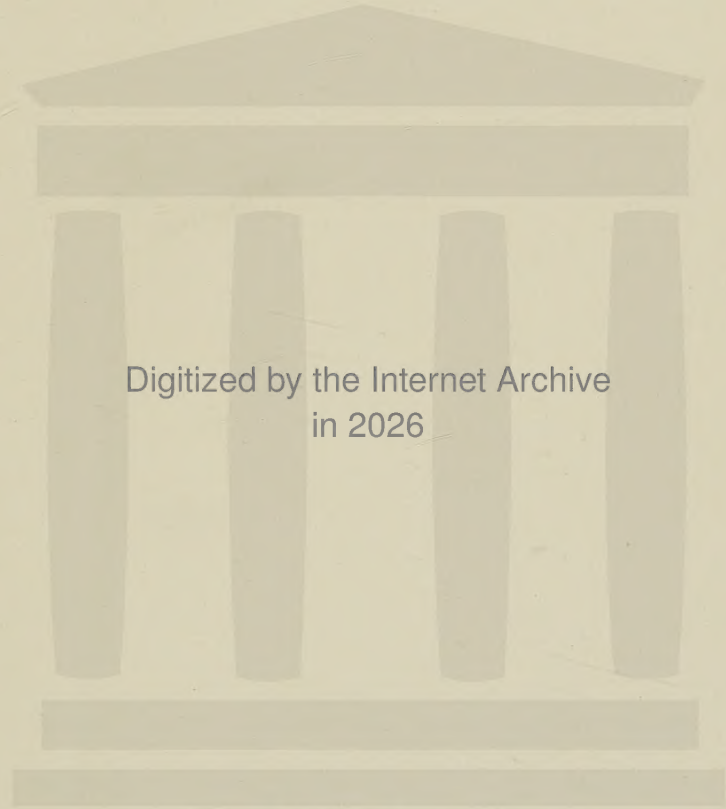
CARUSO

AND HIS ART

By

MARY H. FLINT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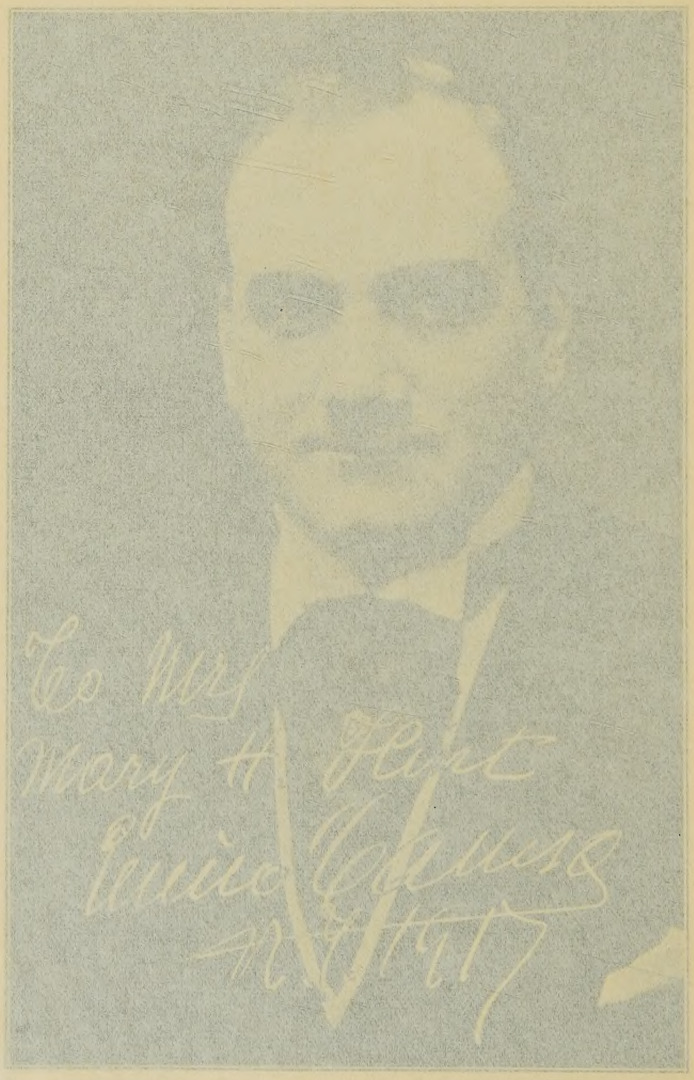

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IMPRESSIONS OF

CARUSO

AND HIS ART

as portrayed at the

METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE

By

MARY H. FLINT

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MARY H. FLINT

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Foreword

ENRICO CARUSO was born in Naples in 1873. Naturally he sang when a boy, for all Italian boys sing, but he had grown almost to manhood before he thought of a professional career. Then ambition seized him and he began to study seriously. When a little over twenty years of age he made his debut in an unimportant role in a provincial theatre, and subsequent appearances were at first of the same character. One of his first engagements outside of Italy was in Fiume, and later he sang in Russia, Monte Carlo, Portugal, South America and London, reaching the goal of all Italian singers—La Scala in Milan—in 1900. Always the beautiful voice attracted attention, but the development of his dramatic talent was slow.

Caruso was about thirty years old when he came to the Metropolitan. He was not heralded as a world wonder, for while the velvet voice and the marvellous phrasing immediately aroused admiration, he was still handicapped histrionically. Perhaps it was because his years of hard work began to tell, perhaps

it was the atmosphere of America that stimulated him, for here his progress as an actor was rapid, and while the voice grew richer and fuller and smoother, the tenor came to be a great artist, a wonderful interpreter of his roles, and the idol of the American public.

His fame was now world wide and South America and Europe vied for his services during the months he was not engaged here. Heretofore, the rank of the world's greatest singer had always been held by a woman; no man had ever approached Caruso's unique position. He is now not only the greatest singer and operatic artist of his time, but it is quite probable that he will go down into history as the greatest singer and operatic artist of all times.

Italy may claim him as the land of his birth but he belongs to America, for it is here, on our soil, under our skies, amidst our surroundings, that he has developed into what he is to-day.

Des Grieux in "Manon" and "Manon Lescaut"

IT was the Sage of Concord who wrote "All mankind love a lover"—but Emerson, that pure and gentle soul, could not have intended to apply that aphorism to the heroes of the operatic stage; for while they are almost always enamored of the opposite sex, they are frequently lovers who could never command the love of all mankind.

These roles are usually written for tenors, and the public looks eagerly to see which of them are apportioned to Enrico Caruso. Everybody wants to hear him sing, and everybody likes to see the many different ways in which he plays the lover. Perhaps in his whole repertory, there is no stage lover more popular than DES GRIEUX and yet it would be hard to find a more contemptible character than the DES GRIEUX of Abbé Prévost. He is a compound of the most sickly sentimentality and the lowest forms of vice, and he is boldly announced by his author as being only seventeen! Neither Massenet nor Puccini has at-

tempted to depict the profligate of Abbé Prévost, nor does Caruso attempt it either, any more than he does to appear seventeen.

The tale of the Abbé is used as a foundation tion for a passionate love-story of a weak, headstrong boy and a frail, pretty woman, and while the DES GRIEUX of Puccini is rather more manly than that of Massenet, neither of them deserves to be called an impersonation of an important or distinct character. One goes to either opera to hear Caruso sing his impassioned music, and those who are interested in his acting find his love-making as innocent as that of Booth Tarkington's Willie, and his grief over the death of Manon as real as if he were the most model of husbands.

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CARUSO AS "DES GRIEUX"

The Duke in "Rigoletto"

IN adapting an operatic plot from a story, great liberty is often taken, but when an opera is constructed from a spoken play—as is the case in *Rigoletto*—the principal characters are generally faithfully copied. There is no more detestable character depicted on the operatic stage than the DUKE OF MANTUA. He is a profligate of the Don Juan type, but more brutal than the Spanish nobleman, and Caruso's portrait of this cold-blooded villain is as repulsive as it is true.

Operatic tenors have usually paid little attention to the acting of this role, as it calls for no temperamental display, and only a great artist would think it worth while to take so much pains to portray cool insolence, and the utter selfishness of a man so dissolute that not one redeeming feature appears in his character. Nothing could be more diabolical than the DUKE'S laugh which greets the courtiers when they announce they have captured Gilda, or his bravado when he proclaims that all women are alike to him.

This was the role in which Caruso made his American debut fourteen years ago, and though the critics said his "voice was pleasing" and that he "made a good impression," he made no sensation, the reviewers of the performance reminding him that it was a baritone's opera and that it was Sembrich and Scotti who attracted the public. Perhaps so in 1903, but to-day while both Gilda and the Jester must be good singers and good actors, they are no longer the chief attraction, for the general public comes to hear the great tenor sing the part of the Duke, which comes to a climax in "La Donna è Mobile" and the quartet. Only the more discriminating ones are specially observant of his acting, for *Rigoletto*, the hunched-back Jester is still considered the role of histrionic interest in the opera.

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CARUSO AS "THE DUKE"

Nadir in the "Pearl Fishers"

EVEN the discriminating ones cannot find anything dramatic in the role of NADIR. *The Pearl Fishers* tells a simple story, and the hero loves, loses, finds again and wins. Caruso never looked better on the stage than he does in his Oriental costume, and he never sang better than he does in his really charming solos and duets in this placid musical composition.

One looks in vain for the dramatic situations which Bizet has depicted so strongly in *Carmen,* and one listens in vain for the unique and fascinating charm of the *Carmen* music. Perhaps it is because the more familiar opera has such a strong hold on the affections of music lovers that the unfamiliar one is more or less disappointing. If it had not been written by Bizet, it might have met with more public approval.

Its picturesqueness is unquestionable, but the whole opera is so monotonous that not

even the touch of mysticism in it can give it dramatic importance. One almost wishes a flavor of real wickedness could be introduced to impart vitality to this very beautiful music, which flows along as gently as Sweet Afton without being so melodic.

Photo by White

CARUSO AS "NADIR"

Lionel in "Marta"

IT is only its strong melodies that save *Marta* from being utterly commonplace. Caruso's "M'Appari" and "The Last Rose of Summer"—especially the verse sung in English—would arouse enthusiasm in any audience, but one can hardly imagine that in these days the opera of *Marta* could be acceptably received by the habitues of the Metropolitan without the great tenor's LIONEL. Even as NADIR is Caruso's most attractive impersonation, both in costume and make up, so is LIONEL the least attractive. Exactly why he should have to wear clothes and wig so unbecoming is not easily explained, for simplicity does not necessarily mean ugliness, but the golden voice atones for all visible short-comings. LIONEL, like DES GRIEUX, is a singing part, and the action in *Marta* is of so slight importance that not even the singers themselves take it seriously, while in such a trivial role Caruso seems to say to himself "I have so little to do, I must amuse the

people" and so he gives vent to his natural love of humor in his curtain calls and in response to demands for encores, which are received with shouts of laughter from the audience. His imitations of the awkward bow of the school-boy and the curtsey of the dancing miss are irresistibly funny.

Photo by White

CARUSO AS "LIONEL"
(WITH HEMPEL AS "MARTA")

Nemorino in "L'Elisir d'Amore"

CARUSO'S interludes of humor vastly relieve the dullness of *Marta,* but only those who have seen the tenor in *L'Elisir d'Amore* realize how great a comedian he is. In the roles previously mentioned, Caruso has moments of standing or sitting around doing nothing, but in *L'Elisir* he has no such moments, for his by-play is continuous. Caruso's NEMORINO is a delightful creation, and though his make-up is very simple he appears more youthful than in any other of his characters. The foolishness of the foolish boy would be inanity in less capable hands, but the sillier the thing he does the more heartily one laughs. His childish trust in Dulcamara's quack medicine, his whimpering "Dottore! Dottore!" when it does not work as he expected, his jealousy of Belcore, his adoration of Adina, his by-play with Giannetta—all show the art of a true comedian.

Caruso's serious roles are so carefully thought out that there are seldom noticeable changes in the performances, but in his humorous characters he loves to introduce new stage business. One never knows how he is

going to show his affection for his bottle of Elixir, for he never does it twice alike. When Dulcamara tells NEMORINO to shake the bottle well and let none of the vapor escape, his directions are followed with mirth-provoking care, though the fluid in the bottle is usually on the "still" order. Perhaps this was not realistic enough to suit the tenor, for on one occasion at least the bottle was filled with sarsaparilla, which popped with a vengeance and the precious Elixir spattered his face, even his eyes.

The opera presents a good singing part for Caruso all through and reaches its climax in his superb rendering of "Una furtiva lagrima." For these few minutes he throws his comic mask aside, though he instantly resumes it when the thunders of applause following the song so insistently demand an encore that he rumples his hair, and saunters around the stage with his back to the audience, calling out nonchalantly, "it is not allowed." Certainly NEMORINO is a lover whom all mankind could love. Altogether *L'Elisir* is such a charming performance that one wonders why it has been so many years out of Caruso's repertory, and hopes it will be retained hereafter in his regular list.

Photo by White

CARUSO AS "NEMORINO"

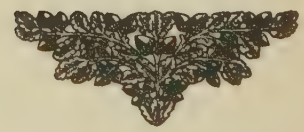
Rodolfo in "La Boheme"

IN the character of NEMORINO, Caruso is the honest lover all the time, and the comedian all the time, without a serious moment except when singing his great aria—and he is always serious when singing great arias. But as RODOLFO he is another kind of comedian—a true Bohemian, full of buffoonery, his whole conception of the part well illustrated by the exaggeration of his costume. While other tenors often depict RODOLFO as a man rather apart from the other Bohemians—even going to the extent of clothing him like a country clergyman—Caruso makes him one of their very own, his antics rivalling those of Marcello.

In the early part of the opera, Mimi is only an incident in his life, he loves her as he has loved others, and his relations with her have no more serious aspect than those of Marcello and Musetta, but when Mimi is really ill and dying, though all the fraternal crowd in the garret are sobered in the sight of death—some

of them even to tears—it is only Caruso's RODOLFO that has the real touch of misery in it. One feels that the others are temporarily distracted from their gay life, and that even Marcello and Musetta may soon be quarreling again, but that RODOLFO truly loves Mimi, is broken-hearted at losing her and that his grief will not be the passing event of a day.

La Bohème has always been a greater favorite with the public than with musicians, but when Caruso sings in the opera he not only infuses new beauty into the vocal score, but at the same time gives a deeper imprint to the character of RODOLFO than it usually receives.



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CARUSO AS "RODOLFO"

Don José in "Carmen"

MOST of Caruso's characters maintain a consistent type throughout. THE DUKE is as great a villain at the end of the opera as he was at the beginning; NADIR is an honest man from first to last; NEMORINO, the same silly fool when the curtain goes down as he was when it went up. RODOLFO has revealed in the closing scene of the opera a depth of feeling not hinted at in the previous acts, but no violent change has taken place.

It is DON JOSÉ who appears in distinct types. He is at first a country boy, and quite an ordinary one at that, who has become an under Army officer. He is such a rustic that he takes no notice of Carmen when she first tries to attract his attention and shows only surprise when she throws the rose at him. His lack of depth in his character is shown by his matter-of-fact love for Micaela, his lack of strength by his conniving at Carmen's escape, and his desertion of his military duties. Slowly the intoxication of his love for his mistress destroys whatever there has been of good in him and brings all there is of bad in him to the

surface. His love for his mother, that love for parents so sacred to Spaniards, has acted as a restraint at times, but even this is swept away by the storm of passion and jealousy that enthralls him in the last act.

The dramatic interest of the first two acts is not great enough to distract one's attention from Caruso's singing. One listens to the duet with Micaela and to the Flower Song and finds them worth one's whole attention. But in the third act the mind wanders from the music; the eye is too busy watching the lover who cannot realize that he has been supplanted, his sullen jealousy being gradually transformed into the depths of despair and a murderous frenzy.

If, when it was first announced that Caruso was to sing DON JOSÉ, there were some who doubted he would rise to the dramatic heights required in the last act, no one doubted it after his first performance. From the moment he appears, haggard and unshaven, hanging around the door of the bull-ring, until he throws himself on Carmen's dead body, he gives a superb representation of the wretched boy whose life has been ruined by the wanton. He is crazed by his infatuation for her, crazed at her perfidy, and his murderous intent is as

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CARUSO AS "DON JOSÉ"

sure as his last pleadings are pitiful when he is convinced they are of no avail.

Even as one's whole attention can be fixed on the tenor's singing in the first two acts, so can it be fixed on his acting in the last one. In this scene, the representation is so absorbing, that one hardly knows whether Caruso is singing or not. His whole conception of the character of DON JOSÉ is a masterpiece from beginning to end.

Radames in "Aida"

IN the lovers depicted so far, many characteristics have been portrayed—love, hate, jealousy, cruelty, cold-blooded villany, sentiment and sentimentality, but dignity, except in the character of NADIR, has been totally lacking, and even then it has not been made a prominent feature of the action. In Caruso's RADAMES, dignity is the principal trait shown. True, the Egyptian is a lover, but first, last and above all he is a soldier. Even when he sings "Celeste Aida" he says "After I have been victorious, I will claim Aida's love." His face is impassive throughout the whole opera, his feelings are expressed in his singing and not in action.

When Amneris is offered him as a reward for his victories in war, he does not look at her —he neither welcomes her nor bursts into a passion and repulses her—he simply ignores her and the heaving of his shoulders is the only sign he gives of emotion.

Nor does he display tenderness in his love scenes with Aida. He is a warrior—his domestic life is a secondary affair, and whether he be compelled to marry Amneris or is allowed to marry Aida, is of minor importance compared to the fact that he has unwittingly betrayed his country. His most dramatic scene is where he gives up his sword, but even then he does not lose his imperturbable dignity.

It is a classic performance, with the result that the tenor can give his almost undivided attention to his singing, and there is no role that he sings better, and perhaps none where he has such beautiful music to sing. Verdi's masterpiece gives him solos, duets and ensembles afforded him by no other opera, and these combined with the glittering surroundings and his noble, even imposing manner, make an impression that cannot be forgotten. To RADAMES, it is honor above all things and the character is maintained consistently to the bitter end.

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CARUSO AS "RADAMES"

Samson in "Samson and Dalila"

LOSE observers have long considered Caruso's RADAMES—the self-possessed Egyptian—a remarkable impersonation.

Others who prefer more violence in action are more interested in his DON JOSÉ. But neither of these characters reveals the scope of his dramatic powers. It is in the role of SAMSON that he can claim a much greater histrionic achievement. In the opening scene, his invocations to the God of Israel, and his exhortations to his people, are uttered with a majestic dignity, a dignity tinged with religious fervor. He is more than a warrior bent merely on conquest, obeying the orders of his superiors—he is a leader of his people, determined to avenge their wrongs, and to deliver them from the bondage of their oppressors. His fervid utterances and his deeds of valor inspire his followers with courage and put terror into the hearts of his enemies, who, finding it impossible to withstand him by fair means, use foul, and send the temptress to work his destruction. Though when Dalila appears he is immediately affected by the power of her dazzling and seductive beauty, he is never a willing victim,

repelling her endearments and endeavoring to escape from them while she winds her coils tighter and tighter.

SAMSON, as represented by Caruso, is not a lover, he is a man who resists with all his strength the fascination of the siren, until his strength is exhausted and passion has overcome reason. Dalila's triumph is short, for hardly has SAMSON succumbed to her when his reason returns and he electrifies his audience by his abandonment to despair when he realizes what he has done, and even takes his curtain call in the depths of self-abasement.

Instead of this being the climax of the opera, from this moment the tragedy deepens. The curtain goes up on SAMSON blinded, bare-foot and in captivity, turning the mill wheel. Again he invokes the God of Israel in behalf of his people, crying out

> "Lord, take my life! Let that atone
> For all the sorrows they endure;
> Let every tear and sigh and moan
> Be visited on me—impure."

From the beginning of the opera to the end of this scene, our breathless attention has to be divided between the beautiful singing and the wonderful acting, but when SAMSON has been dragged out of prison and, led by the child,

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CARUSO AS "SAMSON"

appears with tottering footsteps in the temple, again a suppliant to Jehovah, defying his mocking tormentors, turning a deaf ear to Dalila's renewed blandishments, beseeching in his depths of agony the God of Israel to restore his powers for one moment—through this whole scene until the temple falls, the interest of the eye supersedes that of the ear, and as the curtains close, one knows that the SAMSON of Enrico Caruso will be recorded as one of the greatest impersonations of the operatic stage.

Canio in "Pagliacci"

WHY has CANIO been left to the last? Some cynic might suggest that his place as a married man should be after the lovers; while if popularity is to be considered, others would contend that this role should be mentioned first. There is nothing Caruso does that draws a bigger crowd than *Pagliacci;* there is nothing he sings that evokes more applause than "Ridi Pagliaccio;" yet the opera, strictly speaking, is melodrama, and though Caruso tries to elevate it to a higher plane, melodrama gives no artist a

chance to display his greatest talents as singer or actor.

Probably no living artist could sing or act CANIO better than Caruso, but the exaggerations of manner and the startling situations demanded by the story are strong limitations to the artistic value of the sensational scenes in the opera, and one personal opinion is that the tenor is at his best in the first few minutes he is on the stage, when he is not acting at all, but is simply himself, beating his drum, kicking Tonio and otherwise giving vent to the boyish ebullition of spirits that is one of his most marked natural characteristics. You can call this merry personality CANIO if you like—it is Enrico Caruso.

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CARUSO, BY HIMSELF—A FANTASY

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